

# CALL and less commonly taught languages – still a way to go

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**Abstract.** Many Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) innovations mainly apply to the Most Commonly Taught Languages (MCTLs), especially English. Recent manifestations of CALL for MCTLs such as corpora, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are found less frequently in the world of Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs). While some resources exist, there is not the range and variety of CALL resources available for these languages compared with the MCTLs. The vast majority of CALL literature refers to learning English in many different contexts and there is a limited amount of publications on LCTLs in the CALL domain. There are many reasons for this, including economic, political, cultural and historical ones as well as the fact that English is the *de facto* global lingua franca at the moment. It is important that CALL researchers working with LCTLs utilise the knowledge gained from CALL for the MCTLs. CALL researchers working with LCTLs can also learn from other LCTL CALL researchers and aim to be pragmatic and efficient when designing, developing and deploying CALL resources for learners.

**Keywords:** CALL, less commonly taught languages, CALL challenges.

## 1. Introduction

Most of the recent developments in CALL mainly apply to MCTLs, especially English (Gamper & Knapp, 2002). Indeed, most of the presentations at CALL related conferences and journals report on CALL research for English. This is to be expected as English is by far the most popular language for learners to study due to its prominence as a language of global communication (Nunan, 2001). The popularity of languages for learners is influenced by a variety of factors, including how useful it will be for learners, how potentially beneficial it will be for their career and if it is

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relevant to them for cultural or religious reasons. The term LCTLs ([CARLA, 2016](#)) refers to languages that are not the most commonly studied in a particular region or country. Languages such as French, German and Spanish are also considered MCTLs, although the classification can vary depending on geographical location. For example, from a European perspective, French, German and Spanish are considered MCTLs while Chinese is not. However, Chinese could be considered as a MCTL in the Asian and Oceania contexts and is certainly not a ‘lesser used’ language.

## **2. CALL and LCTLs**

The list of recent and not so recent manifestations of CALL such as the use of corpora, MALL, MOOCs and telecollaboration in CALL ([Beatty, 2013](#)) are found less frequently in the world of LCTLs. It is easy to see why this might be the case as CALL development is difficult ([Ward, 2015](#)). With telecollaboration, at least one group, but preferably both groups, of participants have to be studying or have the ability to use the languages involved in the telecollaboration (e.g. English-French). For LCTLs it can be difficult to find matching language pairs of L1-L2 speakers for unusual combinations of LCTLs (e.g. Polish-Arabic learners).

Many of the LCTLs are under-served by CALL resources and artefacts. In many cases, the knowledge of the worldwide CALL community has not spread out to researchers and teachers working in LCTLs and this is a pity as sometimes mistakes made in the MCTL context is repeated in the LCTL one. It takes time for the normalisation of CALL to occur and often the teachers and learners of LCTLs go through the (potentially painful) CALL normalisation cycle rather than avoiding pitfalls and arriving at normalisation quicker. Lack of awareness of strategies that have been successful in the MCTL context mean that this knowledge is not leveraged in the LCTL context. Sometimes the CALL assessment developers did not even speak the language for which they were developing resources ([Ryan & Brunfaut, forthcoming](#)). [Godwin-Jones \(2013\)](#) provides a good overview of technology and LCTLs.

## **3. Extra CALL challenges for LCTLs**

There are several extra CALL challenges for LCTLs – these include motivation, limited access to suitable resources and pedagogical issues. Motivation is very important in the language learning context and perhaps even more so in the LCTL context. There are several extrinsic motivational reasons for learning an MCTL (e.g. potential economic benefits) but perhaps fewer for LCTLs. Some learners learn an

LCTL for pragmatic reasons, (e.g if you are living in the Czech Republic it is useful to learn Czech). Some learners learn an LCTL for heritage reasons, perhaps as adults or ‘encouraged’ by their parents (e.g. children of Greek heritage learning Greek in the UK). However, learners of an LCTL may need more motivational help if there is a smaller pool of peer learners for them to interact with and learn from (e.g. Japanese students learning Russian).

With the advent of the internet, in theory, learners of an LCTL can also have access to a wide range of written, spoken and video resources in the target learning language. However, the mere existence of these materials does not imply that they are useful for language learners if they are too advanced for the learner or outside the learner’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987). The materials need to be filtered and adapted to the learner’s needs. Learners whose L1 is written using a Latin or extended Latin alphabet often learn a new language using a Romanised version of that language and this can hinder their language learning progress (Reichelt, 2011). Van Aacken (1999) reports on the difficulties learners have with character-based languages. Japanese is one of the most spoken languages in the world and Japanese has overtaken German as the third most used language on the web (W3Techs, 2016). However, this does not automatically imply that it is useful for learners. For example, if a learner of Japanese is learning the language using romaji, the application of the Latin script to write Japanese, material written in kanji, hiragana and katakana will be unintelligible to the learner. For MCTLs, especially English, there is a wealth of pedagogical knowledge on how to teach the language, including how to teach to different groups of L1 learners. However, there is a lot less research into the pedagogical issues involved in teaching many of the LCTLs. For some languages, e.g. Russian (Rodgers, 1967), there is a history of research into the difficulties students face when learning the language, but for others there are gaps. For example, what are the different challenges faced by L1 Greek speakers compared with L1 Thai speakers when learning Finnish? CALL design should draw on second language acquisition as well as language specific acquisition research in the case of LCTLs, as that research may not be very extensive and this could hamper the design of good CALL resources.

#### **4. Examples of LCTLs**

Arabic, Irish and Nawat are three LCTLs with different profiles and challenges. There are approximately 400 million Arabic speakers, and yet, until recently, it was an LCTL. Recent geo-political events have seen an increase in student numbers.

Learners of Arabic face challenges when learning to read and write in Arabic ([Aliakbari, 2002](#)). They often learn the language with short vowels marked by diacritics which are generally not used in written texts for native speakers and this can make it challenging for these learners to read authentic materials. Arabic is an example of a language with a large number of speakers that does not have the corresponding quantity of CALL resources available to learners.

Irish is one of the two official languages in Ireland, the other one being English. English, however, is the L1 of the vast majority of the population. Most of the teachers are L2 speakers and there are continued improvements in the pedagogy of Irish. There are some high quality CALL resources for Irish (e.g. [Abair, 2016](#); Gramadóir: a grammar-checking framework, [Scannell, 2008](#)) but there is a lack of awareness amongst learners about their existence. Other CALL resources are aimed at linguists or may be developed by enthusiasts (and may contain errors) and are thus unsuitable for learners.

Nawat is an Endangered Language (EL) spoken in Western El Salvador. There are approximately 150 remaining L1 speakers. In recent years, there have been some CALL resources available for the language, but there are either fairly basic ([Ward, 2001](#)) or comprehensive ([King, 2016](#)) but lack interactivity. However, even though the resources are basic, they are of use to learners. Nawat is an example of an extremely EL that shares many characteristics with other ELs (limited number of native speakers, mainly elderly in poor circumstances) but has managed to develop CALL resources that can provide a starting point for other CALL and non-technological resources.

## 5. Conclusions

There are fewer CALL resources available for LCTLs compared with the MCTLs, one reason, as suggested by [Wang \(2009\)](#), might be related to the smaller pool of expertise available to LCTL CALL researchers. The CALL community can liaise with university teaching departments and teacher training colleges to make the future generation of teachers aware of CALL and how it can help in the learning process of LCTLs. It may seem that the difficulties may preclude the development of CALL resources for LCTLs, and there is no denying that it is more challenging in the LCLTs context. However, there are examples of CALL resources for LCTLs that can provide inspiration for LCTL CALL researchers, for example for Icelandic ([IcelandicOnline, 2014](#)) and Dutch ([Rubens, 2014](#)).

While such resources may lack the coverage and depth of other CALL artefacts, they can provide valuable resources for language learners.

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